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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001832

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-22-13

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM MOPS SOCI PREF CE LTTE

SUBJECT: In Mission visit, Jaffna seems calm, but deep tensions between Tamils and military remain

Refs: Colombo 1827, and previous

(U) Classified by Bruce Lohof, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: DCM and SA/INS desk officer visited Jaffna for one day of meetings with military, government, and NGO officials on October 17. Based on the team's observations, a semblance of normal life is steadily returning to this war-torn area in Sri Lanka's far north. As they have in past visits, however, Tamils complained about the Sri Lankan military's security zones, which cover roughly a fifth of the region's land area. Overall, despite the major strands of dissonance remaining, contacts were basically optimistic about the peace process. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) VISIT TO JAFFNA: DCM Entwistle, SA/INS Desk Officer Waller, Poloff, and Pol FSN visited Jaffna District in northern Sri Lanka on October 17. In traveling to Jaffna, the team took a commercial flight from Colombo's Ratmalana military airbase, arriving at Palaly airbase an hour later. The U.S. team's first meeting was with the Sri Lankan military at Palaly airbase, which also serves as the headquarters of GSL security forces for the region. The rest of the team's schedule involved meetings in Jaffna town, the largest urban area in the region with a population of about 70,000 people, which is located roughly 20 kilometers south of Palaly.

13. (SBU) REVITALIZATION CONTINUES: After years of war followed by almost two years of relative peace beginning in December 2001, a semblance of normal life is steadily returning to the Jaffna area. This despite a large-scale military presence (see below), and the unseen, but very real specter of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) influence. Compared with observations made during recent Mission visits, for example, the team observed an increasing number of war-damaged homes being renovated and many new shops bustling with customers. Jaffna town's narrow streets were crowded with pedestrians and buses vying for right of way, as adults went about their business and children went to school. Interlocutors told team members that many residents were avidly preparing for the upcoming Hindu festival of lights, Deepavali, which is traditionally a joyous holiday. Deepavali, which takes place this year on October 24, had not been openly celebrated in Jaffna during the 1983-2001 years of conflict.

14. (C) The strides toward normality that are being made in Jaffna are clearly not accidental, but rather the result of concerted effort by the government, NGOs, and businesses. Some examples of efforts to make Jaffna a more livable place follow:

-- C. Pathmanathan, the Jaffna Government Agent (GA), told the team that his office was focused on rebuilding the area's administrative structure, addressing the housing problem, as well as improving the water delivery and sanitation infrastructure.

-- Ruwan Chandrasekera, the Jaffna-based representative of the GSL's Human Rights Commission (HRC), emphasized that his organization was working closely with the local Sri Lankan police force, staffed mainly with Sinhalese, to improve its performance on human rights matters.

-- Given the opportunities for greater island-wide contact since the start of the peace process, Saroja Sivachandran from the Jaffna-based Center for Women and Development told the team that her organization's programs to support small business enterprises run by women were benefiting from increased technical expertise and funding from Colombo-based groups.

-- In addition, based on what the team picked up, businesses, some owned by Tamils living overseas and some based in the south, had proven increasingly willing to invest in Jaffna in light of the ongoing peace process.

15. (C) MILITARY PRESENCE SPARKS TENSIONS: Although the mood in the Jaffna area seemed less heavy and more upbeat compared with recent visits, significant tensions clearly continue to divide Tamils and the Sri Lankan military. The major flashpoint involves the military's "high security zones," which cover roughly 20 percent of Jaffna's landmass. Local residents maintain that the security zones hinder the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and prevent the economic and agricultural development of prime land. Adding to the tensions with the military are a recent spate of traffic accidents involving military vehicles, which have resulted in some civilian casualties.

16. (C) In the briefing given at Palaly airbase, Brigadier General Chandasiri admitted the existence of serious tensions between local residents and the military. He commented that the situation was not nearly as poor as some Tamils were making it out to be and he stressed that the military was trying to be considerate of civilian needs. Some civilian access was being allowed into the security zones in northern Jaffna, for example, with many Tamils allowed to attend school in the zones. In making his comments, Chandasiri appeared to be indicating that the military was willing to loosen up its restrictions in northern Jaffna, as opposed to those in place in the southern area, which is adjacent to the line of control and the LTTE's armed forces.

17. (C) In an interesting remark that put the tensions in a different light, Chandrasekera of the Human Rights Commission added that the LTTE was most likely largely responsible for agitating Tamils against the military. It is fairly clear that the LTTE -- which technically has no role in governing the region -- is exercising a high degree of influence within the Tamil community in Jaffna, although Chandrasekera and other interlocutors did not mention it explicitly. In fact, it is commonly whispered that Ilyamparuthi, the LTTE's political chief in Jaffna, is operating almost as a governor, with the GA having little real influence.

18. (C) COMMENT: Based on what the team heard, Jaffna seemed to be in the best mood it has been in a long time. In different ways, interlocutors conveyed the message that Jaffna residents were eager for more healing, which was very positive. That said, as noted above, the relationship between Tamils and the military is still poor. Moreover, there is also the very real, if largely unobtrusive, presence of LTTE cadre, who are putting pressure on both Tamils and the local government structure. Overall, despite the major strands of dissonance remaining, contacts were basically optimistic about the peace process. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Desk Officer Waller did not have the opportunity to clear on this cable before departure.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

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